

“THE GOD WHO GIVES LIFE TO THE DEAD”

Romans 4:13–25

Key Verse: 4:17

“...as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations’—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

What do you think about your faith? Is it strong? Weak? Maybe a little vague? MIA? Even non-existent? Some people say, “Well, I have my own kind of faith.” Yes faith should be personal. But the Bible does tell us to have a certain kind of faith. God calls us all to faith in himself. But what does that really mean? God also calls us to believe specifically in Jesus his Son. But, believe *what*?

In Romans Paul has shared the bad news: in both our sin and our self-righteousness, we all deserve the wrath of God. But then comes the good news: God is the God who justifies the ungodly. No matter how ugly we’ve been, God counts us as righteous if we believe in his grace to us in Jesus. Paul has shown Abraham as the prime example of this faith (4:1–12). The blessing of righteousness by faith is that God covers, and even forgets our sin (7,8). Now, Paul says that as we believe in Jesus we “walk in the footsteps” of Abraham’s faith (12). We share his same promise to be “heir of the world” (13), the same “grace” (16), the same connection with him our true “father” (16b), the same hope in the living God (17–21), and the same righteousness (18–25). We especially share his faith in “the God ...who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (17). What does it mean to have this quality of faith in real life? And why do we need it? May God speak to us through his word.

First, “heir of the world” (13a). Let’s read verse 13. Here, Paul first tells us God gave Abraham his promise. In fact, the theme of “promise” runs throughout this entire passage (13, 14, 16, 20, 21). Paul is emphasizing that the righteousness of faith is based on the promise of God. And the brief phrase “heir of the world” (13) stands out as a great summary of all God’s promises to Abraham. God promised he would have descendants like the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5; 22:17). God promised him land far beyond what he could imagine (Gen. 12:7; 13:5; 15:18–20). God promised him that in his descendants “all the nations of the earth shall

be blessed” (Gen. 22:18a). All these aspects of his promises to Abraham show that God’s intention was far greater than establishing the nation of Israel. God wanted to use Abraham and his descendants to bless the whole world. God’s promise to him to be “heir of the world” was fulfilled in Jesus. In Jesus, the offspring of Abraham, God promises us, as Isaiah said, “the new heavens and new earth” (Isa. 65:17; 66:22). God promises us a new social order, different from anything the world has ever seen. Through faith in Jesus all kinds of people become new creations in Christ (Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17). One day, even creation itself will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:19–22). God’s promise to be “heir of the world” is ours if we truly believe in Jesus.

Second, not through the law but through faith (13b–15). Look at verses 13-15. The Jews were stuck in holding onto the law as their righteousness, so they found it hard to just receive the gospel. But Paul makes it clear: God brings all his blessings through faith, not through the law. The law only brings wrath, because it stirs up our sinful nature to break God’s law, which leads us into something worse—actual transgression. Intentional transgression is even worse than the sin within us.

Third, “...in order that the promise may rest on grace” (16a). Let’s read verse 16a. God chose Abraham and counted him as righteous sheerly because of his own grace. This became the model of how God planned to continue to work among sinful human beings. We never earn God’s righteousness through our works or our efforts; we receive God’s righteousness as a gift, only by his grace. If the promise rested on our performance, it could never be guaranteed—there would always be a question of whether we would be faithful to measure up or not. But God’s grace erases this question altogether. It also opens the door to all kinds of spiritual offspring, who share this same grace.

Fourth, “the father of us all” (16b). Let’s read verse 16b. Paul writes: “...not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all...” This actually summarizes what Paul already said in verses 11b–12: “The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.” Paul repeats that Abraham is our

father of faith to emphasize the universal, non-ethnic scope of God's plan of salvation by faith. And he especially wants to resolve conflicts between Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome. Abraham, the man of faith, is the true spiritual father for all who receive God's grace by faith, regardless of the law or their race.

Fifth, hope in the life-giving Creator God (17–21). Here Paul reaches his climax. Read verse 17. This is the first and only time Paul quotes Genesis 17:5, to prove without a doubt that God wanted Abraham to be the father not just of the Jews but of all who believe in Jesus. But what Paul stresses in this quote from Genesis is the quality of Abraham's faith in God. He says: "in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (17b). This is a powerful statement about the quality of faith God calls us to have.

For Abraham, to live in the presence of God was to walk before God and be blameless (Gen. 17:1). It was to stop living before people and start living and walking in the presence of God Almighty. God woke Abraham up from living in compromise, for his human desire, and to start living in his own presence, to please him. It was a radical shift in heart, mind, and in daily focus. It would be a life of truly seeing and knowing the Almighty God. God promised not only to give him a son with Sarah, but to do so much more. He promised to make him "the father of many nations." His life's impact would be far greater than he ever imagined. Through training him in his impossible situation to live in his presence, God would make Abraham the spiritual father, the example of faith, for people of all nations.

Paul describes more of what Abraham's life in God's presence looked like. Read verses 18–19. Paul uses one of his most beautiful phrases here: "In hope he believed against hope." Living in God's presence gives us this same hope. Even in all the discouragements of our lives and ministries, this hope in God helps us believe against hope. When he learned such faith, Abraham faced a collision of realities. On the one hand, there was his own body, which was as good as dead, and Sarah's womb, which was also in a state of deadness. How could he overcome such a discouraging reality? Read verses 20–21. Again Paul emphasizes Abraham's faith in God's promise, and in God's power to fulfill it. The God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist could surely give him and Sarah a son. Abraham could believe the promise

because he knew firsthand the One who made it. Abraham did not just have faith in the impossible, but firm faith in Almighty God and in his promise.

Sixth, faith in Jesus counted as our righteousness (22–25). It was this quality of faith in Abraham that God counted as righteousness (22). Why does Paul spend so much time defining Abraham's faith in terms of "the God who gives life to the dead"? It's because this is exactly the kind of faith God requires of us today. So, what does it mean to have this faith? Read verses 23–25. God asks us to believe two specific facts: that he delivered up Jesus for our trespasses, and that he raised him for our justification. It's how we practically apply Abraham's "resurrection faith." It seems simple, but it's hard. It's as hard as believing a 100-year-old man and a 90-year-old barren woman could have a son. But Abraham believed it because he knew God Almighty, the living God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. This living, Almighty God is the One who raised Jesus from the dead. He delivered up Jesus for our trespasses and raised him for our justification. In this gospel God promises to count us right with him, and to not count our sins against him, no matter who we are. He promises to make us heirs of the world. He promises to give us his grace. He promises to make us members of his spiritual family. He promises to give us hope in God. He promises to give us the righteousness of Jesus. He promises to give life to our dead souls. Even today he calls into existence people who are new creations in Christ. He calls into existence new works of God, creating new communities of fellowship in Christ and drawing them to himself.

When God called me, I was a spiritually dead young man. Though I grew up in a Christian family, I had lived godlessly pretty much my whole life. I had committed so many sins, my soul had become sick. Yet by his one-sided grace God called me to live by faith. But to change my course of life was nearly impossible. I'd been pursuing the world, but God called me to follow Jesus with my whole heart and life. I had no idea how and no strength to do it. After receiving training my sophomore and junior years in college, by my senior year God gave me several growing disciple candidates. Outwardly I seemed okay, but inwardly I was still sick with pride, lust and guilt. So God gave me more training. He helped me find myself in his holy presence as one who deserved nothing from him but wrath. Yet he still called me to faith in Jesus. Through a Sunday message I received the grace of Jesus to me, and began to hold onto his promise that he would save me from my sins. Thus began my shepherd life. God

who gives life to the dead and calls things into existence that did not exist empowered me to do what I could never do myself. Ever since, he's been with me to use me as his servant, only by his grace.

The last verses say, "It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (24b–25). In light of Abraham's faith in the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that did not exist, we don't just believe God could raise Jesus from the dead; we believe God did raise him, and that he did so for our justification. And remember that "justification" also means "vindication." Because God vindicated Jesus through his resurrection, in spite of all the accusations and despising he received, when we believe in Jesus, even though we are such unworthy sinners, God will vindicate us as well.

So, what do you think about your faith? Is it rooted and focused on what God has done for us in Jesus? Is it faith that God gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist? Is it real faith in what God promises to give us in Jesus? May God grant each of us the quality of faith that believes in the God who raises the dead.